

Chapter 12

Increasing Abstract Language

Referential Requesting

Referential requesting involves expanding the child's ability to make self/other referential statements as well as discuss self/other distinctions and use self/other referencing while requesting.

Self-Referential Requesting

As requesting expands into a give and take flow of answering questions, directing others and fluidly answering WH questions the focus should move to more personally based arguments. Here the child should be able to describe themselves and their personal likes and dislikes as well as patterns of behavior and integrate that information into their arguments and requesting. This step moves from directing the environment based on pure statements to tying the statements to personal desire, motivation, interests and activities. We want to move beyond the "I want x" to a description of the self and how the desire is based on personal interests. An example of a typical expanded requesting sequence before this point would be: Child, "I would like a cookie please" (Basic request). Parent, "No, dinner will be ready soon" (obstacle statement), Child, "Can I please have a cookie." Parent, "Can you wait until after dinner? (Time referenced obstacle)" Child, "No, I want one now." Here the child is basically making statements. What we are looking for here is for the child to move beyond I want to arguments which support the "I want" statement.

An example of a requesting sequence that we would want to reward would be: Child "Can I have a cookie please" (basic request). Parent, "No, dinner will be ready

soon” (obstacle statement). Child, “But I’m really hungry and I can’t wait.” Here the child made an argument that supports the basic “I want” with a reason why. We would want to give the child a cookie at this time because their basic level of requesting has increase to be more sophisticated. The child was able to support the “I want” with a reason why that referenced their hunger and inability to delay.” Here the child may use likes and dislikes, preferences, identifying characteristics, personal goals to support arguments.

It should be noted that the parent will change from saying no to saying yes based on the level of sophistication of the child’s argument. This will lead to a child that persists and argues their point longer. The goal here is to build fluid verbal behavior and to do that the child needs to become more of a behavior problem. If the parent continues a focus and desire to have a child that is very well behaved and does not talk back, these strategies interfere with their goals. This strategy is designed to increase language. A parent may have to accept the idea that a child will become more out of control for a short period of time to increase language. Once the language has moved to a more advanced level the parent can always return to a focus on behavioral control.

Other-Referential Requests

The next step is for the child to integrate information relevant to another person’s motivation. He moves on to requesting sequences which reference the requested individual’s preferences, identifying characteristics and personal goals. The child moves from an extended request such as “But I’m really hungry and I can’t wait,” which is a self referenced request to further their argument to a statement such as “But your cookie’s are so great that I can’t wait that long.” Here the child is referencing the other a person’s

ability to make great cookies. Or the child may say, “But, you didn’t make me any lunch and I am starving and can’t wait.” This is also a higher level request that references the requested person and should be rewarded at this level.

Integration of Self/Other Referencing into Requesting

Here the child is rewarded for integrating self/other referencing in the form of me/you, here/there, now/then, if/then reasoning and perspective taking into the extended request. As an ice cream truck comes down the road and the child requests: “Can I have some money for ice cream?” (Basic request) and the parent says “No, that will spoil your dinner” (obstacle statement), the child could respond, “I’ll get you an ice cream bar if you give me the money.” Here the child is integrating me/you and if/then arguments into the request. The goal at this point is to reward more complex combinations of arguments to support the request. Ideally the extension of the request will involve a conversation where the child references their own desires and supports their desires with an argument and also takes into consideration the motivation of the other person involved in the requesting process. As requesting becomes more sophisticated the child moves from a focus on the self and personal desires to a focus on understanding others and their desires and motivations.

Abstraction of Expressive Label’s

Here the child is taught the abstraction of expressive label’s and expressive statements. Ideally these programs are taught during natural skill building play with the child. The focus is on taking the expressive label’s and extended expressive label’s and working with the child to use the expressive label’s and integrate the label’s in a more abstract way. First we focus on expanding the natural quality of the child’s language

through shifting topics, politeness, and interviewing and assertiveness programs. The child is taught how to shift between topics by practicing standard shifting statements. Shifting statements and polite statements can be taught in the same sentence completion or word order formats described above. We teach the child interviewing skills or basic questions that can be asked of others to gain information about them and assertive statements as opposed to aggressive or passive statements. The therapist's main concern when doing these programs is to increase the natural flow of language.

Next we move on to directly learning to abstract the expressive labels and statements through teaching idioms, synonyms, antonyms, metaphors, and analogies. The child is taught that one word can mean multiple things, different words can stand for the same thing and different words can have opposite meanings. The child learns to compare similarities between real world objects and their abstract labels and to use the labels of similar but not exact real world objects to give labels to an object for which they do not know the label. The child learns how abstract labels can be similar and distinct from one and other. With these programs the child learns how the verbal community deals with and manipulates abstract labels in a generative fashion. The child also learns society's opinions about issues such as real and pretend, fact vs. opinion, and self directed and other directed dialogs. These programs focus on helping the child to organize their thought's in a way that will be consistent with society.

Problem solving skills are taught with programs such as problem/solution. The child is taught critical thinking skills. The majority of these programs follow a standard Lovaas training procedure. The programs should focus on information that is most practically useful to the child and should be done when possible in the child's natural

environment and through fun oriented play activities. Therapist's can become very creative at this point making up games to teach these concepts. These programs provide the raw material for the child to use during extended and referential requesting. The child can be taught to use language in an abstract way through these programs but they will take on personal significance for the child when they can use their ability to abstract from concrete expressive label's to accomplish their goals and get what they want in the world.

We also focus on teaching the child to label and discuss non-verbal communication such as tone of voice and body language and how to show interest in the behavior of others. The child is taught about subtle language usage through programs that focus on humor and sarcasm. We also teach emotional themes as the issues come up. If the issues don't naturally come up the therapist should arrange the environmental experience of the child to elicit the themes. The child is taught that discussion and contemplation of these and other emotional themes leads to desired goals.

Emotional Requesting

After a child has been taught to extend their requests into a natural give and take conversation, integrate abstract statements, comments learned through sentence completion and expressive label's within requesting, and can reference their own and others interest and motivation to extend and support a request they are ready for emotional requesting. Here the child is successful when integrating emotional arguments related to self and others interests into requests. The child has been introduced to the emotional themes in the expressive label's programs. The purpose of learning emotional themes is to be able to use them to accomplish goals when relating to people. This is not the ultimate goal but at this stage the use of emotional themes in this way will consolidate

the themes into the child's life and the child will see that they are useful in a practical way.

As the extended requests moves from being a fairly concrete request, to a request supported by arguments which define self and other's interests and demonstrate an understanding of other's motivations, we start looking for the child to use the emotional arguments they have learned within their extended requests. What we are looking for here is for the child to make supporting arguments during a requesting sequence which pull in the emotional themes. For example the child says, "Can we go to the beach today?" and the parent responds, "I have too much work to do honey," and the child responds, "We haven't had much time together and I miss you."

As we look for more sophisticated arguments you can see that the arguments become more productive. "I miss spending time with you" is going to work much better than, "I want to," "I haven't been to the beach lately," or "I'll give you five dollars to take me." The overall concern while expanding requesting and developmentally advancing the quality of the argument is to make productive certain forms of verbal behavior, so that the child will be more competent at relating to others and more capable of connecting emotion and desires with behavioral outcomes.

At this level a child is taught to integrate emotional themes into their give and take verbal interactions. The questions that we ask a child and our responses to the child's requests can be very powerful when teaching a child to integrate emotional themes. It is best to target teaching emotions embedded within verbal interaction around requesting. Ideally we want a child to become comfortable discussing emotional issues. To bring out these themes we want to be listening to the child's arguments while

requesting and to provide what the child is asking for when they use emotional information in their arguments.

Suppose a child is asking to stay outside a bit longer. The parent says it is time to come in and get ready for bed (obstacle statement) if the child were to say “I am angry with Johnny and I need some time to cool down before bed” the parent should recognize that this is a higher order argument that integrates emotional themes and allow the child to play a bit longer.

Next we move on to teaching and discussing multilayered communication through discussions within requesting which draw the child into recognizing and discussing motivation at multiple levels including surface motivation, hidden motivations, paradoxical motivation and Irony.

Understanding Boundaries

The final elaboration of expressive labels relates to understanding boundaries and relations between expressive labels. Here the child is taught about relationship boundaries and how to flexibly navigate these boundary issues. We have already expanded expressive labels into extended request's or statements. Those statements are used within requesting and the child can reframe and abstract the concrete expressive labels and statements they have learned. When the child comes up against unfamiliar objects and situations s/he can use language that is an extrapolation from what he/she has been taught. The child is integrating emotional themes with comments, statements, and requesting. The child now discusses emotional themes in relation to boundaries based on person. There are physical and verbal boundaries that society expects when dealing with different people. Family, friends, teachers, authority figures, and strangers all have

different socially defined boundaries. Recognition of the boundaries leads to friendships, jobs, social status, and safety. Not recognizing the socially defined boundaries based on person leads to isolation, difficulty in social situation and the worst case scenario death.

Next the child needs to be able to alter his/her understanding of social boundaries based on what they are told. Someone saying, "I'm getting angry we should drop the topic," needs to be understood as boundary defining information or content. People need to be able to recognize how boundaries may change via the content of interactions.

The child not only needs to understand that boundaries can be based on person and content but that boundaries can also vary based on the process of behavior and verbal behavior within an interaction. Boundaries may need to be altered based on the feedback the child receives from others. For example as a friend starts to escalate and become angry increasing social distance and or changing your personal verbal style may become useful to maintaining the friendship.

Finally boundaries may change base on the context. We behave differently at church than we do at a football game. The child needs to recognize the context of what is said, where they are, who they are with and alter boundaries accordingly.